

Eye Spy the Vision Van

Vision testing van will tour island.

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-By Megan Stephenson

Molokai residents have a rare opportunity rolling their way – a van equipped to provide free retina screenings will visit the island next week. Retina screenings test eye pressure, which can help detect diseases like macular degeneration (loss of vision in the center field, making near-sightedness very difficult), high blood pressure and diabetes. The retina screenings, a service that is no longer available on the island, is sponsored by the Molokai Lions Club.

The tests are provided by ‘Project Vision,’ a non-profit mobile unit set up by the Retina Institute of Hawaii. The van will be shipped from Oahu free of charge by the Young Brothers. This is the first time the van will be touring Molokai, and will be stopping at three locations: Kilohana, Kualapu`u, and Kaunakakai. There is no age restriction or financial qualification to be screened.

Dr. Bill Thomas, chief of staff and the medical director of Molokai General Hospital, said hypertension and diabetes are the two most common illnesses on Molokai, both of which a retina test can help detect. The hospital refers their diabetic patients to retinal experts every year to check sight progression.

The screenings are a collaborative effort between the District 50 Hawaii Lions, the American Diabetes Association and the Retina Institute of Hawaii (RIH). Annie Hiller is technician with RIH in Honolulu, and said these tests are very important to under-served communities, such as Molokai, where regular eye care is neglected.

“It’s not only a screening tool, it’s an education tool,” Hiller said. “Eye care is overlooked, people forget to be conscious of their vision.”

The retina is the eye’s gateway to the brain – it takes in light and carries the information along the optic nerve to the brain for processing. Without a properly functioning retina, near-sighted vision would be nearly impossible.

Screening Process

Cushman said the testing process takes about 10 minutes, from paperwork to the actual

eye test. Hiller and another technician, Donovan Lopez, will be training 10 Lions Club volunteers how to run the equipment.

A photo of the eye taken during the test will be sent digitally to RIH in Honolulu. A trained ophthalmologist will diagnose any problems. The results are then sent by mail to the participants.

Molokai Eye Care

General eye care on Molokai is mostly provided by Dr. Douglas Chu, who comes to Molokai from his Honolulu practice twice a month. His office said any further testing for diseases such as glaucoma, retina testing, laser procedures or eye surgery is done either at his office in Honolulu or referrals to other Oahu practices. The retina test usually costs around \$200 and is only partially covered by insurance.

Jackie Cushman, Molokai Lion Club secretary, said it is the main mission of the Molokai Lions Club to provide various vision screening tests. Earlier this year, the club brought in two ophthalmologists from Maui to give general eye exams to all the elementary school students (with permission slips) on the island.

Project Vision

Dr. Michael Bennett, the founder and president of the RIH, also created 'Project Vision.' He bought the first van in 2007 to reach underserved communities, said Hiller. She has been a coordinator and trainer for 10 events so far this year, serving 560 people in Hilo on the Big Island alone.

"Many underinsured don't take it upon themselves [to do diagnostic tests]," Cushman said. "It's like a blood test, needed to determine if body functions are not working properly."

The vision van will be at the Kilohana Recreation Center on Oct. 13th from 10am to 2pm; the Kualapu`u Recreation Center on Oct. 14th from 10am to 2pm; and Home Pumehana in Kaunakakai on Oct. 15th from 10am to 4pm